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San Francisco, California

*Jasmine*

Welded steel

The human tendency to gift is a beautiful thing, but a complicated one in a money-incentivized world, where little is truly free. Through my research I became fascinated with the idea of a gift economy, in which all commerce, trade, and barter is replaced by giving. There is a city that runs on such an economy, where free is the default, that only exists for one week every summer: Black Rock City, the annually reconstructed metropolis where Burning Man takes place.

Burning Man is made particularly beautiful and unique by the gifts of artists. It is a place for creativity, collaboration, and exquisitely expressive art, which populates the open landscape known as the Playa. This summer will be my first time attending, and I wanted one of my gifts to the event to be an artistic creation of my own.

I made a life-size horse sculpture in response to a call for artists put out by the Sierra Arts Foundation. They are curating a herd to install on the Playa to raise awareness about the perils facing Nevada's wild horses and burros. In conversation with Rebekah Stetson, a collaborator for the project and chairwoman of the Coalition for Healthy Nevada Lands, I learned how the overpopulation of horses has put strain on the local resources, jeopardizing the native wildlife and the horses themselves. As a prospective animal rescuer, I knew this was the right project for me to contribute to.

*Jasmine* is a geometric horse welded from steel rods. I drew inspiration from Adrian Landon, Deborah Butterfield, and puppets from the play *War Horse*. It is both my first welded project and the largest art piece I have ever created. I can't wait to see it on the Playa!

# The Art of Gifting



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OS46

*Writer's Note: What does it mean for something to be free? What purpose does gifting serve, personally and culturally? How has the act of gifting been impacted by capitalism and consumerism? How do gifting and art interact?*

I am motivated by joy. Often my own joy, but more importantly the joy of others, from which my own is inextricable. Seeing someone smile because of something I did is the most rewarding feeling. That is the main reason I give gifts: to spread and share delight. Other times it's to express gratitude or love, or as a form of support for a friend who is struggling. It is a way to let people know that I'm here, and that I care about them and their happiness. And if my gift brings a bit more happiness into their lives, it will have accomplished all that I intended it to.

## **I. Gifting and Culture**

I am from San Francisco, a historical hotspot of counterculture, and the origin of two pioneering forces of radical gifting: The Diggers and Burning Man. The Diggers were activists who emerged from San Francisco in the 1960s with a vision for a money-free society. Many of their actions sought to aid in the influx of youth drawn to San Francisco's hippie scene and the strain it put on the unprepared city. They created "Free Stores" in the Haight-Ashbury, stocked with donated items free to be taken by anyone. For three years they served homemade meals in Golden Gate Park twice a day to anyone who stopped by. Much of the food was made from



Digger Free Store. Photo by Jim Marshall.

surplus from farmers markets and grocery stores, or produce that didn't quite meet establishment standards and otherwise would have been wasted. They opened free clinics and held free concerts and theater performances.

There is so little offered for free in a capitalist culture that gifts can make people suspicious. The Diggers witnessed firsthand the dissonance, almost like a culture shock, that people experience when faced with an abundance of free things. Jane Lapiner, a prominent Digger, said in an interview, "We came out of the Haight-Ashbury and I was up here teaching classes for free. People didn't trust it. It couldn't've been good if it was free! They wanted you to charge. It was a really interesting revelation, to me" (Babcock). She also described watching children try to "steal" items from the free stores, not grasping that such a feat was impossible and nonsensical. Other times people would try to offer money for the items, which was always declined. It is something I have noticed in my own gift-giving. People don't want to take something without anything to offer in return.

Humans' tendency to give is a beautiful thing, and it is devastating to see the ways it can be corrupted by consumerism and capitalism. We have learned to view interactions with each other as transactions. We are told that "nothing is truly free," and that there is always a hidden cost. Giving is equated with charity, so people hesitate to accept gifts out of pride. Gift giving traditions and holidays, such as Christmas and Valentine's Day, are co-opted by brands as marketing opportunities. A money-incentivized world interferes with the spirit of gifts, of free things, experiences, and joy shared unconditionally between people.

Black Rock City, the annually reconstructed metropolis where Burning Man takes place, might be the only city in the world to run on a gift economy akin to the one envisioned by the Diggers. Burning Man started in 1986 as a gathering of friends on Baker Beach in San Francisco, and is named for the iconic wooden figure built and burned each year. In 1990, the community outgrew San Francisco and relocated to the expansive and vacant Black Rock Desert in Nevada. Over time it accumulated new values and traditions, drew more and more participants, and evolved into an experimental city that fills with 70,000 people every summer then disappears without a trace.

At Burning Man, there is no commerce and no currency. Business, trade and barter are replaced by gifting, one of the 10 core principles that define the community: “Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value” (Harvey). Though it only exists for one week of the year, Black Rock City is complete with bars, food, a bike repair shop (bikes are the primary form of transportation), a DMV (Department of Mutant Vehicles), a temple, medical centers, a newspaper, an airport, and more – all created by volunteers/participants and offered for free. Hundreds of theme camps offer their own unique gifts in the manner of the Free Stores, some physical, many experiential. Rebekah Stetson, a Burning Man participant and collaborator for the Burning Man art project I hope to contribute to, described Burning Man to me as “the largest display of human kindness and public art you will ever see in your whole life.”

At Burning Man, gifting is also engaged in by participants on a personal level. Everyone has something to give, and these gifts can take all sorts of forms. A cool drink, a hug, a compliment, a shared talent, a handmade craft, or some spare sunscreen are often appreciated more than miscellaneous products and tokens. When asked about gifting on a public Burning

Man forum, people emphasized that “The best gifts come from the heart and/or are useful. They are also given in that context: after a connection or to serve a need. They are not always tangible. They respect the recipient. They are given with no expectation of direct recompense, but instead a spirit of paying it forward” (Theotherkeith). Another respondent shared that “to me it's all about: what can I do to make your day better right now? Every time I cross someone I have a chance to say something or do something to make them smile or make them feel better” (Nephyst). Gifts at Burning Man are given to strengthen the community, to help others in need, to express sentiment, to meet new people, and to create and spread joy. These responses reflect a much healthier understanding of gifting and its purpose than that which permeates the rest of society.

## **II. Intention**

To me, gift-giving is an inherently unselfish act. However, many anthropologists and researchers attribute more complex and less altruistic motives to the act of gift-giving. Marcel Mauss, a French sociologist and anthropologist, claims that all gifts are motivated by reciprocity. Sociology researcher Aafke Komter explains that, “in his view, giving is not only a material act, but also a symbolic medium involving strong moral obligations to return” (Komter 300). Mauss designates reciprocity as the foundation of a successful community and society, and treats giving as a social tool to strengthen the ties and mutual obligation between people.

Essential to Mauss’ philosophy is the notion that gift-givers anticipate reciprocation, and that gift-giving necessitates it. I find this view counterintuitive, and so did Larry Harvey, one of the co-founders of Burning Man. In his essay, *A Guide to Gifting, Givers and Gratitude*, he stated that “when dealing with individuals, organizations and enterprises, if anything is offered

with an expectation of return, though it may be a friendly favor, it is not a gift — it is a transaction” (Harvey). While it is true that people give things to one another with ulterior motives, I believe these motives disqualify that interaction from being a true and genuine gift.

Gift-giving is a powerful interpersonal force, but Mauss overestimated the importance of reciprocity in making it such. The positive social impact of a gift is not to create a sense of indebtedness and obligation between people, but to foster feelings of gratitude and care for one another. When people feel pressured to reciprocate presents, it can actually be counterproductive. A study of gift-giving and agapic love revealed that “the perceived necessity to reciprocate in some way can lead to obligatory gift exchange without underlying feelings of love” (Belk 400). “Obligatory gift exchange,” is an oxymoron. For something to be a gift, it must be given freely and willingly.

However, positive feelings generated by gift-giving may increase the propensity for reciprocation, not out of obligation but out of a desire to share or pay forward the joy of receiving a gift. A UC San Diego study demonstrated that recipients of gifts are more likely to gift to others in the future. Paying forward gifts in this manner is not a reciprocatory act, involving no direct transaction or self-interest, but it leads to an overall more generous society.

Anthropologists Bronisław Malinowsky and Marshall Sahlins provide an interesting alternative interpretation of the idea of reciprocity, tying it to the nature of relationship between giver and recipient. “Malinowski and Sahlins assume that the nearer the social relationship, the less a gift resembles an economic or quid pro quo transaction and the purer the feelings accompanying these gifts” (Komter 747). This more accurately captures gift-giving as a loving behavior between family and friends, and can be applied to certain interactions between

acquaintances (tipping in restaurants or giving presents to coworkers might be more akin to business transactions or obligations than gifts).

What Malinowsky and Sahlins fail to account for are presents given to complete strangers. This may have been disregarded because outside of charity and commercial settings, gifts between people who have no relationship to one another are very rare in everyday life, but they constitute the majority of gifts at Burning Man and are particularly fascinating to me. You never expect a gift from a stranger. You have no long term relationship to maintain, no social obligations to fulfill. You've never met them and probably won't see them again, but the brief moment your paths cross is characterized by an act of kindness and generosity: a gift. What gift is more pure of intent than that?

During the early months of the pandemic I started spending a lot more time in parks. They were the only places that hadn't gone vacant, where I could enjoy sunny days and interact with people and their dogs. One day I brought my sketchbook. I took a photo of a happy husky and did a simple pen drawing of them while they



Art I gifted in a park, 2020.

played fetch. The dog's owners were so caught off guard and pleased when I presented it to them. I could see their grins through their masks and they told me it would be framed and cherished - I doubt such a reaction would have been prompted had it not been a spontaneous and honest gift.



### **III. Conclusion**

I give gifts for the same reasons I make art.

The Diggers made their gifting *into* art, by erecting a giant 12-by-12-foot orange picture frame one had to step through to access the free meals they served in the park called the Free Frame of Reference. To commuters driving past on Oak Street, the whole scene took the form of a framed painting. They gave out miniature frames to be worn around one's neck, so that one could hold it up and view the world through a new frame of reference at any point. Gifting was an art form to them.

At Burning Man, art is a form of gifting. The open landscape, known as the Playa, is populated by exquisite, unique, and interactive art, the gifts of the many artists who attend. This year, my art and I will be there too.

With each piece of art I make and each gift I give, I hope to surprise people. I hope to make them look at the world a little differently, shift their frame of reference, inspire them to be a bit more generous and creative in their everyday lives. At the very least, I hope to make them smile.

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